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In Reply Refer To: 10AE

January 29, 2002

UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH'S INFORMATION LETTER

ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN HEALTH CARE

1. This information letter focuses on the ethical issues raised when the quality or accessibility of health care varies according to patient ethnicity. In health care institutions throughout the United States, members of ethnic minorities have been shown to receive less care, or lower quality care than other ethnic groups. It was with the intent to identify and correct all inequities in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that this report was undertaken. In recognizing the importance of acknowledging this problem and developing remedies, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) seeks to fulfill VA's mission to serve all of America's veterans with dignity and compassion.
2. The report, An Ethical Analysis of Ethnic Disparities in Health Care, by VHA's National Ethics Committee begins with an overview of the current knowledge of ethnic disparities in health care in the United States, documenting disparities in utilization, processes of care, and patient outcomes. The report then identifies some possible explanations for ethnic disparities and offers an ethical analysis of each: patient socioeconomic and genetic characteristics; patient values and preferences; barriers to communication between patients and health care providers; practice patterns associated with geographic region; and provider bias. This analysis is followed by an overview of current Federal efforts to address ethnic disparities, with an emphasis on activities within VHA.
3. The report concludes with four recommendations for addressing ethnic disparities in health care: (1) make recognition of the problem a system-wide priority and make solutions part of a health care organization's strategic plan; (2) create explicit policies to reduce or eliminate the causes of ethnic disparities; (3) make cultural competency a priority for clinicians and administrators and offer the needed educational programs and support; and (4) develop model programs to improve access and quality of care for minority veterans.
4. This report can be found on the following web site:
http://vaww.va.gov/vhaethics/resources_4.cfm. Printed copies may be obtained by contacting The National Center for Ethics (10AE), VA Medical and Regional Office center, 215 North Main Street, White River Junction, VT 05009-0001; or e-mailing vhaethics@med.va.gov.

5. Questions about this report, or ethical aspects of ethnic disparities in health care may be directed to Ellen Fox, MD (10AE), Director, National Center for Ethics, (202) 273-6926.

S/ Tom Sanders for
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Under Secretary for Health

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